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Rosemary M. Magee

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Saving Sunday

by Rosemary M. Magee

Shortly after my son left home for his first year of college, I lost his dog. That we eventually found her again provides proof of the power of persistence—accompanied by sweet miracles, accidental epiphanies, and the manifold kindnesses of family, friends, and strangers.

The original appearance of Sunday the dog in our lives came at the inspiration and invitation of Sean on his 14th birthday. Outshining all of the eager, earnest yellow dogs at the pound in her shy beauty, Sunday was rescued by Sean from some other more ordinary fate in life. According to oral tradition at the pound, this lovely creature had been left there one Sunday night in December, hence her name. Later that month, on the bright Atlanta wintry day we brought our new pet home, Sean—also shy and lovely with yellow hair, lopsided grin, and freckles turning into pimples—whispered pledges of enduring love into Sunday's floppy ears. She trembled in his arms. Some combination of abuse, neglect, and genetic predisposition had made Sunday skittish, especially around strangers and, also, we were soon to discover, wary of doors. When we arrived home, Sean coaxed her inside, created a bed from old towels and, worrying that she was too silent, set out to teach her how to bark.

Gradually Sunday settled into the rhythms and byways of our household, although remaining reluctant around strangers—while now successful in barking at them—and still fearful of doors. It was difficult getting Sunday inside when she was outside and outside when she was in the house. However, all four human members of our family also had our own quirks, failings, and anxieties, not to mention those of our elderly deaf and blind cat. And so we accepted Sunday's frailties and learned to love her, most especially for what she meant to Sean.

Eventually Sean's adventures into adolescence took him more frequently away from home. Sunday

remained faithful in her love of him, her rescuer. She slept in his room even when he was not there. As activities and romances filled up larger portions of Sean's time and heart, Sunday gradually bonded also with my husband, who made certain that she had regular meals, fresh water, treats of Swiss cheese, and frequent outings. Sean's sister and I, relegated to the back-up crew, filled in when necessary. Graceful and timid as a deer, Sunday seldom acknowledged our existence in her world; she avoided us as much as she did both doors and strangers.

The week Sean began his freshman year of college on the other side of the continent from Atlanta; his sister, too, left home for graduate school in the Midwest, and his father started a work project on the West Coast. All of these departures meant that Sunday and I were left at home, alone together. That I was in charge of this dog (and she of me) made us both uneasy. As much as Sunday had steered clear of me, I had done my best to avoid emotional entanglements with pets or plants while my children were growing up. I had, from a distance of course, admired Sunday for her bashful beauty and steadfast love of Sean. Beyond that, we were simply co-inhabitants of a regularly chaotic household.

Within a single week our large suburban home—previously abuzz with cell phones, computers, DVDs, teenage happenings, and various heated negotiations—turned indescribably still and silent. Neither Sunday nor I, left to our own devices, made much noise. We eyed one another with suspicion; begrudgingly she accepted her meals from me, and even, when pressed by internal urges, would pass through doorways, from inside to outside and then hesitantly back indoors again.

I took my new responsibilities seriously, my other charges in life dispatched to places far distant from Atlanta, Georgia. If working late, I worried



about Sunday in much the same way that I had worried about my children, especially anxious when afternoon thunderstorms threatened. Sunday was terrified of dark clouds, loud noises, and shifts in barometric pressure. And she, in turn, gave me comfort by just being there in my sudden solitude, even on occasion seeming happy to see me. Our relationship settled into satisfactory patterns—that is, until unforeseen events caused us to lose touch with one another.

On my way out of town for a business trip to New York City, I escorted Sunday to the kennel. Pleased that I'd been able to corral, leash, and load her into the car, I arrived with plenty of time for us to take a short walk. Sunday, anxious but compliant, nosed around the well-kept shrubs and grass surrounding the kennel. Barking dogs on the other side of the wall nearby made her even more tense than usual, as if she had unresolved recollections of her original pound plight. As we neared the kennel door, she suddenly balked. Rearing up like a horse, she managed upon her descent to pull her head straight through her collar, simultaneously backing away from me. She accomplished this feat with such ease that it almost seemed she'd planned the whole maneuver. Scared yet hopeful, I took a few steps forward, and at first it seemed that Sunday might come back to me—until two overly-efficient kennel attendants emerged, having observed this episode through the glass door. With the appearance of the two strangers, Sunday took off in a streak, a blur of yellow that left me with only empty leash and collar in my hands.

"Is she part greyhound?" one of the young men questioned me.

"We think so," I managed to reply forlornly.

Right before our eyes, Sunday, running down a busy street, vanished into the thick air of Atlanta as if she'd never existed. Trailing after her, calling out her name, and then frantically driving my car throughout the nearby neighborhood, now a tangle of traffic and a maze of trees, revealed nothing to me or the kennel attendants. My heart ached as I

knew immediately that I had failed in the single most important duty left to me by my family, with Sean still a new unsettled freshman in college so very far away.

Words are too small, too contained, too ordinary and orderly to express my misery. Somehow, eventually, after consulting my husband out in California, I made it to the Atlanta airport for my business trip, catching a later New York flight and then sobbing on the airplane. By the time I landed, my husband had left a voice mail indicating that he had rallied various neighbors and enlisted his running buddies, and they were searching throughout the neighborhood of the kennel, which was not in the immediate vicinity of our home. They all responded right away to his call for help, as if they had been waiting for just this moment to repay favors, to demonstrate that friendship reigns, to show solidarity even when we had all been pulled apart.

Conducting the search and rescue mission for Sunday from the West Coast, my husband created detailed maps, complex strategies, and colorful flyers. I spoke to Sean by phone on Day 2 of this painful episode. He knew at the start of the conversation from the sound of my voice that I was upset. Reluctant to disrupt his first few weeks at college, I recognized just the same that I needed to tell him the truth. I did so sooner rather than later on the advice of his older sister who coached me from Michigan. He listened quietly as I explained the situation, my voice breaking under the strain of letting him down. He then spoke softly.

"Oh Mom, it's just Sunday. We've done everything we've known how to do to take care of her, to love her, and to give her a good home." His first instinct was to comfort me. I cried inwardly at the thought of his distant kindness. When he then called his father, I learned afterward that he broke down. As I talked to Sean over the next few days, keeping him posted on the rescue plans, he expressed sadness and worry but also awe at all who had come to our aid.



My husband, son, daughter, and I, located in various corners of the country, kept in constant touch. When I returned to Atlanta from New York, I rejoined the rescue mission, already convinced that it was a hopeless cause but prepared to do whatever was necessary to be able to say to myself, and to Sean, that I'd done what I could. At the direction of my husband, our friends continued to explore avenues and streets, to walk throughout the woods, and to post flyers. I haunted the various pounds and shelters in the area. We all came to know a bedraggled nearby neighborhood and several homeless men who camped behind an elementary school next to the creeks. I asked them to keep a lookout for Sunday, thinking that she might find those who are alone and homeless not quite so strange.

In all that time we had only one likely Sunday sighting: a woman who took early morning walks called my husband on his cell phone to say that she had seen a dog, possibly matching our lost dog's description. Buoyed by this report, my husband re-posted the search team and decided to fly home for the weekend from California. He was convinced that Sunday would recognize the sound of his pickup truck, respond to his calls, and magically reappear in our lives. I was prepared to let him enjoy this fantasy for as long as possible.

My husband spent two full days that weekend, from early dawn to well beyond dusk, wandering down streets, questioning strangers and passersby, handing out flyers, and speaking to homeless wayfarers. A man of enormous persistence, in the very marrow of his bones he believes that missing items (from car keys to needles in haystacks) can be found; he also believes that he is the best person to find them. And he is usually right. But the weekend was hurtling by, and come Monday morning he would need to return to the California project. Both of us disheartened, late on the night before his planned departure, we started a quarrel, one that had been resting latent, submerged beneath the layers of our lives—about being apart and adrift, all of the changes, the departures, the losses.

With Sunday's disappearance I'd come to realize that I felt alone just at the moment when it seemed my husband and I might start a new life together in the aftermath of raising two children. Long evening walks, a movie in the afternoon, sleeping late on weekends, and traveling to new places—all of these simple pleasures and more were part of the future I'd envisioned as we completed one phase of our lives and started another. But soon, once again, on the very next day I'd be by myself, this time not even with Sunday to keep me company.

Surprised by these new emotions, my husband, who'd been intermittently unemployed over the four years prior to the California project, was at a loss as to how to respond. We prepared for bed, his face, his being, covered with confusion. In the midst of all of these feelings, the beeper on his cell phone went off, signaling that a message had been left. When he checked the voice mail, his expression, with just the squint of his very blue eyes, turned from confusion and frustration to disbelief. He handed me the phone and replayed the message. The deep voice of a man we'd never met, a stranger identifying himself as Courtney who lives behind Whole Foods, simply stated, "I think I may have your lost dog. She showed up today in my carport."

My husband returned the call as I pulled on jeans and sweatshirt over my nightgown. Very late, after 11:30 p.m. on that Sunday night in September, we headed into the darkness of a cul-de-sac on the other side of a very busy street, about a mile from where our dog had originally disappeared. A friend of Courtney's, who'd been visiting his house, had seen the various flyers in the neighborhood. "I think some people are looking for that dog," the friend had told him. Courtney managed to guide the exhausted creature into his utility room. There she sat trembling in a corner when we arrived.

Without even a collar to identify her, somehow Sunday had survived almost two weeks in the heavily trafficked urban jungle of Atlanta—and



we will never know how she did it. She seemed at first glance much the same, just skinnier, her hind-quarters especially bony. Yet, when we brought her home, we watched her sprint and spin around the front yard with a newfound bravado not formerly part of her spirit. Without a moment's hesitation, she entered our house nonchalantly through the once-dreaded front door.

All of this local drama occurred in the aftermath of a devastating hurricane in our nation, one where the agonized, desperate faces of families filled airwaves and newspapers. Over those two weeks, I felt guilty for so much attention given to our own small loss when other families confronted greater dislocation and tragedy. But we, too, were experiencing a special kind of sorrow. Through it all, the kindness of friends, neighbors, and strangers provided a safe haven for our scattered family, mysteriously connected by a common loss and rediscovery. Suddenly we were all much closer together.

As for the argument my husband and I had started that Sunday night, it magically faded away—as if never begun—with the reappearance of our lost dog. As for Sean and his sister, they quickly returned their attentions to newfound challenges and relationships in their homes away from home. And as for Sunday, she'd experienced a canine conversion, an epiphany of sorts. In the days that followed she was more playful, more carefree, more approachable, more contented. When my husband returned to California, Sunday and I were also more united, as if we'd suffered some terrible ordeal together, as if we had rescued

one another from the whimsy of fortune and the ravages of loneliness.

Following Sunday's reappearance, there was great rejoicing on the Internet and on cell phones all across the country from Atlanta, Georgia, to Walla Walla, Washington, to Ann Arbor, Michigan and beyond. Adding to the occasionally compassionate mysteries of fate, the same weekend my husband came home to find Sunday, he'd been contacted by an Atlanta firm about a job. Reluctant at first to abandon California midway through a project, yet recognizing the importance of this particular moment in our lives, he returned the call and subsequently was offered the job.

When Sean went off to college across the country, he left Sunday behind in my care. Allowing my youngest child to travel so far away nearly broke my heart, and being in charge of his dog gave me a sense of closeness to him. Losing Sunday, the dog he had rescued, made me aware of how fragile, how tenuous connections can be, how quickly they can vanish into thin air. With her return, due to the kindness of friends and strangers and the persistence of my husband, our family found unity in our own private, separate journeys.

Thus on two Sundays, divided in time by years of developments and departures too numerous to recount, a lovely dog was rescued. Just as she was transformed by these Sunday salvations, both times her presence, and her intervening absence, taught us more than we thought we needed to know about ourselves—and also about love, friendship, and reconciliation.

